October 2014

Sea Nettles, Clearing the Brambles, Everything But the Ashes

Michael Salcman

Three Poems

MICHAEL SALCMAN

Sea Nettles
—*Chrysaora quinquecirrha*

The trembling lampshade heads
and shivering arms
have no strange beauty to speak of—
no phosphor glows at night.
No bones, no heart, no brains, no eyes.
The day I no longer recall their name
I feel the onset of age while hauling up
the anonymous curling slime
of tentacles on the anchor chain.
Whatever I once called them
there's no swimming in the midst of this,
so many small ones float by our boat
there's no safety reclining on a raft either,
the conditions precisely as they wish:
hot and humid, a briny mix.
If relief comes, hours later
it's not the name but the knowledge
of how forgetting goes:
life's awful and terrible things wiped first
some small resentments next,
before steering towards a final music,
the mind set free of memory.

Clearing the Brambles

In Old Saybrook, the braided trunks of cedars
shade my Father's face, his legs askew
with the effort of carting lawn chairs to where we wait,
his gravitational platform deserting his desire
to play the host still going strong at ninety-five.

Drinks in our hands we drowse in the sun;
I watch him snatch at sleep like a cat,
gone and back in minutes, his neurons sputtering lamps
decades past the use-by date of his brain.

His nose twitches with the sun, its light flickers
in the maples and birches, rouses swarms of flies and gnats.
Later, my Father and I put seed in the birder
but no cardinals come.

He gets up to work the brambles, pulling up branches
and straggling creepers, snapping them in two
on his knee. He's clearing this field for someone to sell to.

Everything But the Ashes

> If a man saves a single life
> it's as if the saved the entire world—The Talmud

Too weak to kill himself, Weisenthal was saved by starvation.
The ninety-seven pounds that remained on his release
from Malthausen couldn't stop his brain from thinking
of ways to remember the others.
For the brain is a savage beast, it eats when and what
no other organ eats, so the head and eyes
become as large as a child's, the body starves
extremities shrink and the belly develops a paunch. . ..
He said *I am the last... the one who can still speak,*
I will repeat and repeat and repeat this year's inventory:

bound for Berlin, twenty-five freight cars of women's hair,
248 of clothing, a hundred boxcars filled with shoes
and jewelry taken from the Jews;
400,000 watches, four thousand carats of diamonds,
one hundred and sixty tons of wedding rings
the Germans shipped everything but their ashes.
He knew how a grand indictment like this might fit
on a lading slip, how a number might hold a memory.

After the war his brain was still hungry
so it went hunting; Ecce homo! In Sao Paolo,
Franz Stangl of Treblinka and Franz Wagner of So bib or;
in Argentina, Josef Schwammberger of Poland;
in Vienna, Karl Silberbauer, the man who'd arrested Anne,
working as a policeman. Not counting Eichmann
that group was his biggest meal.
His brain snacked on frau Ryan, a housewife in Queens,
where the former queen of Maidenek lived without her whip,
and bit on a Romanian killer in Michigan who hid as an archbishop.
Not that he saw through every disguise:
he missed the Angel of Death.
All in all, he spent fifty years in Vienna,
a city that hated him like a poke in the eye,
surrounded by file cards and photos, affidavits and writs
not a scrap was wasted. This was the life he had to give
and the metabolism of starvation its special gift.
When he died in his sleep at ninety-six
everything was shipped but the ashes.